

School psychologists training in Portugal: Trainers' perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, the 2018 Decree-Law 54/2018 has set the country on the path to inclusive education based on whole-school approaches (Alves, 2019). Now, more than ever, there is an urge for school psychologists to be drivers for inclusion, as agents for systems-change (Ingraham, 2015) versus traditional roles such as assessment and counselling of students - which were found to be the ones Portuguese school psychologists spent most of their time dedicated to (Mendes et al., 2014). This reinforces the need for training school psychologists in applied approaches for the construction of inclusive schools such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework. A partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Portuguese Psychology Association created the conditions for the implementation of a b-learning training course focused on the topic Applied Approaches for the construction of Inclusive Schools. 327 psychologists from public and private Portuguese schools were involved. Trainers were 9 psychologists recognized by their experience and/or knowledge about inclusive education and multi-tiered approaches. The course included synchronous, asynchronous and supervision sessions (see Poster "School Psychologists training in applied approaches for the construction of inclusive schools in Portugal: Process Description" for further details). In this poster, we present the main results from a focus group discussion with some of the trainers of this training course, portraying their perspective on some advantages and challenging aspects of the training course.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

6 trainers (from a total of 9)

Data collection

A focus group was conducted in March 2021 to collect trainers' experiences, reflecting on the challenges, opportunities, and necessary improvements for future training in school psychologists in Portugal (focused on the topic applied approaches for inclusive schools).

Data analysis

Focus group audio was transcribed and data was analysed using Nvivo14 - content analysis with pre-categories (opportunities, challenges, improvements).

MAIN RESULTS

B-learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More flexibility for trainers and trainees; Online tools relevant for the training (e.g., breakout rooms, Canvas, Padlet); Opportunity to develop a network of school psychologist from different geographic areas; Possibility to reach psychologists geographically distant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less active participation; Difficulty in listening and incentivising all participants to share their experiences
Content vs Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All content was considered necessary and coherent. Opportunity to challenge some school psychologist with a more traditional role; Participants developed knowledge on critical MTSS characteristics. The exchange of practices and use of practical cases were found to be highly relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> However altogether it was considered highly diverse, complex and challenging to be discussed with the level of deepness it required within the number of hours of the course. The fact that this course occurred during COVID-19 pandemic, particularly a second confinement in Portugal, did not help for participants to be fully invested in the course.
Participants in each group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The number of psychologists in each group was too high (challenging throughout the sessions but most of all in the supervision sessions). Also found to be a challenge was the heterogeneity between psychologists (e.g., years of experience, knowledge on MTSS). 	
Supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity for Psychologists in different schools to come together and develop projects together; Discussion around the obstacles to implement more contextual, organisational and systems-change practices in their schools; Opportunity for Psychologists to have time focused solely on the conception of a project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some obstacles did not allow for a proper supervision process (e.g., time restrains and number of trainees per group for only one trainer). Difficulty in evidence-based practices research and literature reading/application to their project
Main suggestions to improve the course	<p>Do a pilot of a new training versions; Add more hours for exchange on psychologists' practices in schools; Allow participants to implement their projects during the training (follow-up sessions); Develop a second level of the course to deepen each content (e.g., Response to Intervention for reading, writing, mathematics); More time to discuss and show the connection between approaches (e.g., RTI and PBIS); Increase time spent in evidence-based practices applied to each topic (second level training possibly); Involve other school agents in this training (not just Psychologists) since MTSS/contextual and collaborative approaches for inclusive education require all school involvement (e.g., leadership); More content needs to be discussed and deepened in the synchronous sessions; Support psychologists in literature research and how to use it as part of evidence-based practices.</p>	